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AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY OF ETHICS. By Warner Fite. Longmans, Green & Co. New York, London and Bombay, 1903. Pp. xi, 383.

In spite of the fact that the science of ethics has been one of the least progressive branches of knowledge, the writing of a satisfactory text book on the subject seems to have been extremely difficult. The very familiarity of the material seems to have induced a desire to impart a novelty and freshness extraneous to the subject itself. Instead of presenting the obvious facts of the moral life in their simplicity, writers have offered the conflicting philosophic interpretations of these facts. The battle has been waged so long that the real issues have been lost in smoke. What the beginning student needs is a direct analysis of the moral experience itself, not a discussion, however lucid, of what others have thought about it. As both Plato and Aristotle point out, there is a certain danger to the youthful mind in the study of ethics and this danger is increased by whatever tends to substitute conceptions for facts. The laboratory method is at least the ideal of every science. Nothing takes the place of a first-hand study of the material itself.

Professor Fite's book is an introduction to the subject, designed both for the college student and the mature man of general culture. As such, it presupposes a certain maturity and seriousness of mind which, the author admits, may not often be found in the average student. It might perhaps be called a moral philosophy rather than an introductory ethics, for its contents consist of an elaborate development of the philosophic implications of rival ethical theories, a development which is decidedly acute, though far from elementary. It is true that the philosophic body of the book is prefaced by two chapters on the scope and problems of ethics, in which we have a refreshingly simple statement of the author's own views, but having thus defined only too briefly the problems, he plunges at once into the discussion of hedonism and idealism as systems of morals, of society, and of philosophy. It is only after having presented the strength and weakness of these systems, that he offers his own as a compromise between the two. That the conclusion is cleverly worked out does not remove the impression that it would be much more effective on the student if it came as the result of a direct analysis of morality itself. The whole process of stirring up the rivals in order to pacify them at last seems a waste of good time from the educational point of view.

But whatever be one's ideas on the question of the best method of teaching ethics, one cannot fail to admire the systematic and thorough way in which Professor Fite handles his problems. There is a largeness and simplicity in his conception of them, which, while it may mislead in some details, is very suggestive and clarifying. The main problem of practical life, as he sees it, is the conflict between the conservative and the progressive tendencies in human nature, between the tendency to let well enough alone and to enjoy the fruits of one's labors and the tendency to disturb existing conditions in the interest of a more satisfactory ideal, between habit and new adjustment. This conflict within the individual is only one illustration of a universal contrast between principles which appear in society and in the world at large, so that the adequate discussion of the moral problem leads us on into social and philosophic theories. In this larger field the contrast is perhaps best expressed in the antithesis of the mechanical and the purposeful, which are the principles respectively of hedonism and idealism. Accordingly we have discussions of both hedonism and idealism as social theories and as philosophies as well as comparisons of their moral estimates with the judgments of common sense. Nowhere else have these implications been worked out so clearly and concisely as they are here and the discussion forms the most valuable portion of the book. If one were to criticize, it might be suggested that the rival theories represent logical antitheses rather than actual historical systems, but, as the purpose is not primarily historical, this would hardly be a legitimate ground for criticism.

The author's conclusion is that both these attitudes toward life are justifiable, that there must be a place for contentment with achieved good as well as for aspiration after the ideal. "The hedonist proposes to ignore the ideal considerations and to conform strictly to the conditions. The idealist, on the other hand, urges us to ignore the conditions and to devote ourselves immediately to the pursuit of ideal ends. In reply to the hedonist we may claim that the mechanical conditions do not represent a fixed quantity or an impassable limit. The supposedly fixed conditions are themselves in a constant course of development. The mechanical world is being made constantly more serviceable for ideal ends. To the idealist, on the other hand, we may reply that the attainment of ideals is not a question merely of the earnestness and sincerity of our devotion. Admitting that all ideals are

ultimately attainable, we have still to remember that they are only to be attained by proceeding in a certain definite manner from the standpoint of the present situation." The reasonable life is accordingly that in which a compromise is effected between our abstract ideals and the mechanical conditions of their realization. The result constitutes moral health, of which the rule is, "keep your ideals pure, and keep your feet constantly on firm ground," or, "press constantly forward toward the attainment of your highest ideals, but do not attempt a higher flight than you can permanently sustain." This contrast between ideals and reality is a permanent one. Our human life is essentially problematic. "We never reach a point either of complete realization of ideals or of complete conformity to conditions." Our duty is to effect the best possible adjustment of the two, which will consist in the greatest satisfaction of each.

Throughout this positive portion of his work the author's treatment reminds one strongly of Spencer's reconciliation of egoism and altruism, though the optimism of the latter is lacking and the problem is stated in somewhat different terms. But the essential difficulty is the same, the impossibility of reconciling two contrasting points of view without the assumption of a higher point of view from which both the others may be judged. Unless egoism and altruism or hedonism and idealism are to fight it out between them in cat and dog fashion there must be discovered some principle for a proper adjustment of their respective claims, which means that neither is ultimate. Such a principle the author suggests in the idea of moral health, yet if it is to be a true principle it must be more than a resultant of opposite tendencies in human nature, and if it is more than this it would seem to be necessarily some sort of an ideal and not a compromise between ideals and conditions. The author's difficulty perhaps arises from his failure to keep distinct the practical and the theoretical aspects of the problem. It is true enough that every action falls short of its ideal, but that is hardly enough to warrant the statement that the principle is itself a compromise. As a protest against impracticable idealism in actual life the author's discussion is valuable and suggestive, but, as a reconciliation of hedonism and idealism, it is not convincing.

NORMAN WILDE.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA.